

**THE NEW EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE MILAN  
APPROACH: FEMINIST AND SOCIOPOLITICAL  
CONSIDERATIONS\***

Laurie Katherine MacKinnon

University of Calgary  
Calgary, Canada

Dusty Miller

*While the new epistemology and related models of therapy are claimed to have radical social implications, the Milan approach is in ill repute amongst feminists who see it as conservative in relation to women's issues. This paper explores the sociopolitical implications of the new epistemology and the Milan approach, concluding that, while second order cybernetics has greater potential to incorporate a radical social analysis, it has, nevertheless, failed to do so. The application of second order cybernetics in family therapy appears to be constrained by the sociopolitical conservatism of its proponents.*

The new epistemology and related models of therapy have been said to represent a significant departure from earlier forms of family therapy. This "radically new way of thinking about and doing therapy," proposes Tomm (1984a, p. 113), is a significant advance, not only in family therapy, but in psychotherapy, in general. Keeney (1983) notes the radical difference between cybernetic epistemology and our habitual ways of knowing, concluding that a cybernetic view has the potential of transforming the world of therapy. Contrary to these views, however, the new epistemology and related models of therapy, along with most models of family therapy, are in ill repute in feminist circles where they are seen as conservative, rather than radical, in relation to women's issues. Feminist concerns in family therapy have been well articulated, most recently by Taggart (1985) and James and McIntyre (1983), none of whom exclude the new epistemology from their criticism, despite how "radical" the proponents of the approach consider themselves to be.

Taggart (1985) notes how radical feminists and constructivist accounts of epistemology have exposed the inescapable bias in the supposedly objective and neutral sciences. He criticizes family therapists, generally, for constructing their views of families without considering the social context, for not taking into account the therapist's

\*An early version of this paper was presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association of Marital and Family Therapy, San Francisco, CA, October 21, 1984. A later version was given by the senior author as the guest address to the Third Annual New Zealand Family Therapy Conference, Christchurch, New Zealand, May 10, 1985.

The essence of this paper was developed in 1983-84 while both authors were at the Family Therapy Program, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4, Canada. Appreciation is expressed to Karl Tomm, MD, the Family Therapy Program, Calgary, Canada, for his comments on an early draft of this paper and to Kerrie James, MSW, The Marriage Guidance Council of N.S.W., Sydney, Australia, for the discussions concerning a later version.

Laurie Katherine MacKinnon, MSW, is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Social Work, University of Sydney, N.S.W. 2006, Australia.

Dusty Miller, EdD, is on the Faculty, Family Institute of Cambridge, Cambridge, MA 02138.

E. Purkyně  
the  
GRESS  
APY  
nect"

AY 11-15, 1987

D, MARY  
LUIGI  
EF DUSS-VON  
RE, SALVADOR  
, MARA  
ELM STIERLIN,  
I WYNNE,  
esenters.

Petr Boš, M.D.  
Secretary General

position, and for their assumption of objectivity. James and McIntyre accuse family therapists of doing to families what we accuse individual therapists of doing when seeing children—of seeing the client out of context. The degree to which feminist concerns apply to the new epistemology, however, remains unclear. The new epistemology, specifically, has never been subjected to a critique from a feminist or political perspective, nor have Taggart or James and McIntyre distinguished between first and second order cybernetics in their critiques. It could be argued that the new epistemology and related models of therapy differ significantly from earlier theories and forms of family therapy (Keeney, 1983) and, thus, cannot be indiscriminately subjected to the same criticisms.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a sociopolitical critique of some aspects of the new epistemology that have been discussed and applied by therapists from the Milan approach. As a basis for this critique, we draw from social action and feminist perspectives. A social action paradigm is concerned with the differential distribution of resources within society, such as wealth, privilege and political power. Social "problems," from this perspective, represent conflicts over the control of these resources and would not exist if the status quo were not to the economic and political advantage of certain groups (Rule, 1971; MacKinnon and Marlett, 1984). A social action perspective is, thus, concerned with the political nature of theory and therapy—how they function as ideologies which reveal or mystify, and thus, challenge or justify socially structured inequities in social relations. From this perspective, women's social position is seen as socially structured inequality.

In this paper, the "new epistemology" refers to the incorporation into family therapy of the cybernetic approach of Bateson (1972, 1979), Maturana (1980), von Foerster (1973a, 1973b), Varela (1976, 1979) and Varela & Maturana (1973). Theoretically, this has been accomplished by writers such as Keeney (1983) and Dell (1982, 1985), and in practice, by, among others, the Milan associates (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata, 1978) and their proponents (Tomm, 1984a, 1984b; Hoffman, 1981).

The new epistemology has seriously challenged family therapy, in that it has:

1. Critically reviewed family therapy theory. A primary concern of this critique has been whether or not family therapy concepts remained true to the cybernetic systems view as proposed by Bateson. Concepts of power and hierarchy, for example, have been criticized as linear concepts. The cybernetic view is, thus, proposed as a better theory for understanding living systems and, accordingly, families.

2. Pointed to the clinical relevance of the family's "epistemology" or belief systems. Problems are understood as arising within systems of information and meaning; errors in "epistemology" are seen to lie behind many family problems.

3. Provided a description of the therapist/family system from a cybernetic perspective. Second order cybernetics, or the cybernetics of cybernetics, emphasizes the observer's inclusion and participation in the system (Keeney, 1983) and includes such concepts such as "self reference," "recursive processes," and the "construction of reality." The paradigm which includes both first and second order cybernetics will be referred to in this paper as the cybernetic paradigm.

4. Proposed an ontology, i.e., a theory of how the world is (Dell, 1985). This ontology emphasized the circularity and autonomy of systems and challenged notions of linear causality.

The new epistemology differs markedly from general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Second order cybernetics is of a higher order than simple, or first order cybernetics, which emphasizes the homeostatic and adaptive properties of systems and of second cybernetics (Maruyama, 1968) which emphasizes positive feedback in system transformation.

The Milan approach is one model of family therapy that has sought to incorporate constructs emerging from Bateson's work.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, significant cross-fertilization of the Milan model and the work of Maturana (1980) and von Foerster (1973a, 1973b) has also occurred. The Milan approach differs from other models in generating hypotheses that include all system components, moving flexibly in observing different levels (frequently including the therapist-family system) and in its concern with the family's "epistemology" or belief systems. Therapy is facilitative rather than directive, and therapists maintain a neutral stance (MacKinnon, 1983). This model of therapy is most often identified with Boscolo and Cecchin<sup>2</sup> of the Milan associates (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata, 1978) and their proponents (Tomms, 1984a, 1984b; Hoffman, 1981).

To provide a framework for discussing therapy from a sociopolitical perspective, this paper begins by examining the political context in which the new epistemology emerged. The paper then speculates as to the sociopolitical implications of some of the concepts that have emerged from it and from the Milan model of therapy. Several specific concepts are examined, drawing from our observations of therapists in settings where the Milan approach is the primary modality and discussions at workshops and conferences where the cross-fertilization of ideas has occurred. First, the paper discusses the concept of power and its fall into disfavor. Further concepts under consideration include: therapist neutrality, the recursive process of therapy, autonomy of the system and constructivism.

This paper is not meant to be an inclusive explanation of the new epistemology or the Milan approach. Rather, particular concepts are chosen for discussion because of their controversial nature and our concern over how these concepts have been used or misused by therapists in practice. We endeavor to critique in a manner that, while critical, acknowledges the value and potential of these approaches.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THERAPEUTIC TRENDS

How has the new epistemology approach gained such prominence in the field of family therapy? At first glance, the ideas of the Milan associates and of writers such as Keeney and Dell appear to have developed in response to their discovery, or rediscovery, of Bateson's work and their ability to translate these concepts into terms that were useful for family therapists. From this perspective, their subsequent popularity could be seen as acknowledgement by family therapists of the validity and utility of these ideas in practice.

An alternative explanation of how ideas become prominent, however, is that paradigm shifts occur in response to changes in social context (Bitensky, 1973). From this perspective, knowledge is selected on the basis of social criteria and is politically determined. To explain the emergence of the new epistemology in this way would require a deeper analysis both of its occurrence and of its sociopolitical implications. Although either explanation, alone, could be considered a lineal explanation (i.e., from a cybernetic perspective, the emergence of social phenomena occurs evolutionarily and through recursive processes), in order to address the less obvious, here we will examine more closely this alternative explanation.

Illich (1976) and Sedgwick (1982) discuss the political nature of therapy and medical intervention, asserting that what is defined as dysfunction reflects the perspective of those who are dominant in the larger socio-economic system and incorporates the values of its surrounding society. The content of the ethical judgments and social demands that enter into diagnosis and treatment, states Sedgwick (1982), is "sometimes reactionary, often controversial and nearly always left unstated" (p. 25). From this viewpoint, therapy may inhibit social change by undermining the reality of "societal sickness" and distract-

intyre accuse family  
apists of doing when  
ee to which feminist  
r. The new epistemol  
feminist or political  
hed first and  
the new epistemology  
theories and forms of  
ately subjected to the

ue of some aspects of  
rapists from the Milan  
and feminist perspec  
distribution of resources  
cial "problems," from  
ources and would not  
stage of certain groups  
pective is, thus, con-  
function as ideologies  
ructured inequities in  
seen as socially struc-

on into family therapy  
(1980), von Foerster  
73). Theoretically, this  
ll (1982, 1985), and in  
oli, Bescolo, Cecchin,  
fman, 1981).

py, in that it has:  
ncern of this critique  
the cybernetic systems  
or example, have been  
sed as a better theory

ogy" or belief systems.  
n and meaning; errors

n a cybernetic perspec-  
emphasizes the observ-  
includes such concepts  
action of reality." The  
s will be referred to in

ll, 1985). This ontology  
nged notions of linear

ms theory (von Berta-  
simple, or first order  
properties of systems and  
ive feedback in system

ing, or disqualifying, people from the political struggle necessary for a healthier world (Illich, 1976).

Exactly how therapeutic paradigms reflect the prevailing social ideology is a question most easily answered retrospectively. In the midst of a conceptual shift, it is much less clear what this shift reflects about the current social context, particularly if the proponents of the shift claim that their views radically depart from traditional thinking. The relationship between social context and theory development, however, has been analyzed from several other perspectives. By briefly examining the links made by these perspectives, clues may be found about how to begin examining the new epistemology.

Bitensky's (1973) analysis of changing paradigms within American social work, for example, reveals how "... knowledge sought and norms espoused are derived from the problems by which society is confronted, particularly from the political implications of these problems which influence attempts either to solve the issues or to evade them" (p. 120).

The political nature of social work has fluctuated over time, sometimes serving as the conscience of society and, at other times, as an apologist for the status quo (Bitensky, 1973). Despite the now obvious connection between these social and theoretical changes, Bitensky states that none of these shifts in paradigms were regarded by the profession as responses to political changes. Rather, each new paradigm was thought to represent a more valid formulation than previous formulations.

In a similar view, Sedgwick (1982) describes how, in the 1960's, radical psychology held society's oppressive institutions responsible for the injustice and deprivation associated with mental illness (Laing, 1959). As the movement developed, it took a decisively conservative turn, despite maintaining a radical claim. Szasz (1960) proposed that the mental patient's dysfunction was an erroneous mental construct of the helper rather than a reality for the individual. Laing (1967) abandoned a focus on social issues and began to link psychosis to mystical experience. These "radical" viewpoints, thus, denied access to health care and other resources in a fashion similar to conservative definitions of mental health (Sedgwick, 1982).

Jacoby (1975) reviews how Freudian theory was affected by the transfer from European to American culture. He argues that Freudian theory originally encompassed a critical analysis of society, and individual difficulties were seen as an internalization of the social malaise. In America, however, it proponents developed "social amnesia"; they forgot the critical component, and Freudian analysis was reduced to its individualistic form. Curiously enough, it was the lack of attention to context against which pioneering American family therapists then rebelled.

Social science methodology can also be seen as socially and politically influenced and influential. Wadsworth (1982), for example, discusses how empirical research can define a "truth" that mystifies and renders powerless the nonexpert majority. Karger (1983) examines the trend of exalting empirically based practice (e.g., Fischer, 1981), arguing that the symbol of science is manipulated to mask the status hierarchies and the professional division of labor.

The foregoing discussion highlights how theory does not emerge in a lineal fashion simply as an advancement over previous views. Rather, it arises within a political context which, if left uncritically examined, may be reflected in theory construction and practice. Furthermore, theory may then function to legitimate and reinforce the ideology from which it arises.

What, then, are the implications of these analyses in relation to the new epistemology and Milan approach? Several critical questions emerge. Why did the new epistemology become prominent in the 1980's? Can it provide a critical analysis of our social conditions? Who is most served by the prominence of the approach and what status hierarchies are maintained as a result? Are the concepts that emerge from the new

social ideology is a ques-  
nceptual shift, it is much  
ntext, particularly if the  
rom traditional thinking.  
ment, however, has been  
g the links made by these  
ng the new epistemology.  
American social work, for  
used are derived from the  
e political implications of  
issues or to evade them"

ne, sometimes serving as  
the status quo (Bitensky,  
l and theoretical changes,  
egarded by the profession  
was thought to represent

1960's, radical psychology  
tice and deprivation asso-  
eloped, it took a decisively  
t (1960) proposed that the  
ruct of the helper rather  
focus on social issues and  
viewpoints, thus, denied  
o conservative definitions

ted by the transfer from  
ry originally encompassed  
seen as an internalization  
veloped "social amnesia";  
was reduced to its indivi-  
t to context against which

and politically influenced  
ow empirical research can  
onexpert majority. Karger  
ctice (e.g., Fischer, 1981),  
he status hierarchies and

emerge in a lineal fashion  
arises within a political  
in theory construction and  
and reinforce the ideology

elation to the new episte-  
ge. Why did the new epis-  
tical analysis of our social  
approach and what status  
hat emerge from the new

epistemology and Milan approach used to promote a more radical analysis of social structures or to support conservative positions?

In beginning to answer these questions, it may be useful to examine the broader social and political context within which the new epistemology gained prominence. Unlike earlier decades, the 1980's witnessed Western countries entering an economic recession; in the United States, the Equal Rights Amendment bill was defeated, and a reactionary, pro-life movement influenced party politics to support the patriarchal family structure; Reaganomics and similar economic policies severely cut back the financial support to therapeutic and human services; many of the previously won rights of women and minority groups were threatened by the introduction of conservative policies; worldwide concern over the future of the planet has emerged in response to the escalation of the arms race.

What is the relationship of the new epistemology to all of these changes? Those most involved in the new epistemology have written little, if anything, about the issues. Some may even view the discussion of social issues as irrelevant to family therapy. Cecchin (Boscolo, Cecchin, Maturana & von Foerster, 1984a), of the Milan associates, was challenged at a conference because he did not explore the concerns of a woman who described herself as the oppressed wife-mother in a role-play family. He maintained that "therapy is not the place for politics."

On the other hand, it could be hypothesized that the popularity of the new epistemology is a response to the very type of lineal thinking inherent in the politics of the 1980's. Keeney (1983) and Tømm (1984c) indicate that the new epistemology has implications for the larger social system. In introducing his book, Keeney commented briefly on nuclear and ecological issues, concluding that much of our culture is insane.

While the reasons for a theory's emergence may be quite separate from the personal views of the theorists, it may be significant that those most prominent in the new epistemology are of the dominant gender, race and class. This fact lies unaddressed by them, despite their espoused value of including the observer as part of the system. It is interesting to note that, like Cecchin, neither Tømm, Dell nor Keeney (except in his brief introduction) express concern about social issues in any of their writings. In fact, some of these writers demonstrate considerable imperviousness to women's issues by their use of the pronoun "he" as a generic term (Keeney, 1979, 1983; Keeney & Sprengle, 1982; Tømm, 1982, 1985).

Is this lack of attention to social issues related to the nature of the new epistemology, itself, or does it reflect the political conservatism of its proponents? A theory about systems and theories about families are different levels of abstraction. A theory about systems does not encourage discussion about the social content of families' distress, a criticism that has been made of family therapy, generally (James & McIntyre, 1983). However, as we will later argue, this criticism is most appropriately levelled at first order cybernetics. Because second order cybernetics can be utilized to comment on social and political processes, it would seem that it is the new epistemologists, themselves, who have not seen fit to address such issues. Does their lack of attention to social context reveal the very reductionistic thinking they criticize? Or could the avoidance of social issues simply represent a politically neutral position?

Halleck (1971) notes how professional activities designed to change the status quo are commonly labeled political, while those that reinforce the status quo are commonly viewed as neutral. A choice of methodology is *inherently* political: By not addressing certain questions, it minimizes, or overlooks, contradictions and limits one's understanding of reality (Karger, 1983). This charge could, therefore, be levelled at the new epistemologists: Their avoidance of social issues is political. It maintains our focus on abstract concepts and distracts us from the effects of increasing poverty and declining

human rights during this decade. By not challenging oppressive social and political arrangements, they condone these arrangements.

#### *Power vs. Reciprocity*

At a recent conference, Humberto Maturana (Boscolo et al., 1984a) was asked about the notion of power. "Power," he stated, "is created by submission."

Perhaps nothing could more easily provoke feminist criticism than the new epistemologists' dismissal of the concept of power. Power, as understood within the cybernetic paradigm, is a linear construct. To ask whether or not power exists, is an epistemologically irrelevant question (Keeney, 1983). With these arguments, the new epistemologists have closed any further exploration concerning the nature of power.

How, then, does the Milan approach conceptualize relationships? Within the Systemic approach, human relationships are understood from a cybernetic epistemology which orients the observer to focus on recursiveness in the interaction between parts of the system (Tomm, 1984a). Rather than lineal, cause-effects are seen as circular and relationships as reciprocal. Relationships appear to fall into two general patterns: (a) those considered complementary relationships, in which people exchange unlike behaviors; and (b) those termed symmetrical, in which persons exchange like behaviors. In either case, both persons in the relationship contribute to the maintenance of the pattern. The person in the one-down position communicates in such a way as to elicit the corresponding behavior-communication of the other, and vice versa; relationships are, thus, seen as reciprocal.

Dell states (1985), referring first to Bateson's, and then to Maturana's, views: "... Bateson argued that the part cannot control the whole because the part is indeed part of the system and is thereby itself subject to the circular causal processes in which it participates. Nevertheless, even if the part were external to the system, it still could not exercise control because structural determinism makes instructive interaction ontologically impossible" (p. 15).

Milan therapists discern circular patterns of interaction through an interview process that is guided by a systemic hypothesis. The hypothesis should ultimately explain how all components of the system contribute in maintaining the pattern and should not be seen as true or false, only useful in guaranteeing the activity of the therapist in eliciting relational patterns. Milan therapists often conclude sessions with a positive connotation of the pattern that has been elicited through the hypothesis testing.

This view of relationships holds many therapeutic advantages. By seeking the fit between one person's position and the reciprocal ideas and behaviors of other family members, Milan therapists avoid linear blaming of one person as the "cause" of the problem. Moral judgement, states Tomm (1984a) is directed to the pattern and not to a person. The therapist regards the situation as one in which the "participants are caught in a recursive pattern. . . more like a misfortune, calling for compassion for the persons involved rather than condemnation" (Tomm, 1984a, p. 118). Therapists, thus, remain neutral, more engaged with all family members, and more able to allow the family more freedom to explore alternatives for change. Most significantly, if we are to believe Bateson, by avoiding the framework of power, therapists avoid reinforcing the epistemological error that lies at the heart of many families' difficulties, i.e., the lineal villain-victim perspective.

The notion of reciprocity, however, implies that participants are not only mutually, but *equally*, involved in maintaining the interaction. Yet, interactions vary markedly in the degree to which each participant can influence outcome. From a feminist viewpoint, the Milan interviewing methodology may be all too successful in reducing blame, thereby creating a "reality" in which all family members appear to be equally respon-

sible. This becomes most problematic in situations such as incest, child abuse, and wife battering, where the problem may be maintained in part by a family member's socially sanctioned, compassionate view of the perpetrator. If women and children are understood to be contributing equally to these situations and if therapists remain compassionate towards the perpetrator, then therapists may avoid directly opposing the abusive behavior and fail to guarantee the safety of the woman or child. Of perhaps equal concern is the psychological effect on the woman or child of this form of "blaming the victim."

Wilden (1972) refers to the tendency of our culture to deny complementarity, to "flatten out" or to symmetrize nonsymmetrical relationships. This occurs in family therapy theory when marriage partners are conceptualized as contributing equally to the maintenance of a complementary relationship, or when a relationship in which the woman struggles against male dominance or privilege is termed symmetrical. Relationships of dominance and subservience between unequal partners are, thus, described as competitive relations between free and equal legal, psychological and socio-economic subjects (Wilden, 1972). Domination within a relationship then appears no more serious than a game played equally by both. Such a view results from the refusal to acknowledge the broader social context of domination and exploitation. When they assume that all persons in relationships are not only mutually, but equally, responsive, and therefore, equally responsible in creating and maintaining a relationship, therapists obscure the reality of socially structured inequality.

### *The Metaphor of Power*

Debates concerning power date back to discussions between Haley and Bateson during their early work. Bateson had argued that punctuating the world in terms of "power" reinforces greed and corruption in all those who believe in the reality of social power, whether they think they have it or not (Bateson, 1979; Keeney, 1983). Unilateral control of one component over another within a systemic unity is an impossibility, referred to by Bateson and Keeney as the "myth of power" and by Maturana as the impossibility of "instructive interaction" (Dell, 1985). The belief in power, Bateson maintained, has potentially destructive consequences. Persons who believe that they can have unilateral control are more likely to attempt to do so, and thus, engage in an interaction with little regard for the ecological consequences.

But is the belief in power always destructive? Bateson and Keeney would seem to imply so, never envisioning instances where conceptualizing in terms of power is likely to be of social benefit. One need only look, however, to the history of the black civil rights, feminist, gay, and disability movements to see that this is not so. When those with little social influence organize, think, and act in the world in terms of power, the result has, at times, been a movement toward greater social justice. Nor is it always the case that those who conceptualize their social influence in terms of power will attempt to abuse their influence. For example, men influenced by the feminist movement often endeavor to equalize their relationships with women. Thinking in terms of powerlessness may, thus, enable individuals to counteract societal influences towards domination and discrimination. In fact, it may be those who lack an analysis of power relations who most easily, albeit unintentionally, engage in oppressive relationships.

"Power" as a metaphor, Bateson and Keeney propose, more appropriately describes material processes rather than mental or human processes. Because a cybernetic perspective examines family processes in terms of form, pattern and organization rather than in material terms, to ask whether or not power exists is an epistemologically irrelevant question (Keeney, 1983). From a different, but related, perspective, for Maturana the word "cause" is synonymous with "instructive interaction," a phenomenon which he considers impossible:

Newton portrayed a mechanistic world wherein forces and impacts *causally* determined the behavior of objects. Maturana insists that this view of causal determinism is ontologically impossible. Forces and impacts cannot determine, specify or instruct the behavior of an object. They are merely the historical occasion for the system to continue its structure-determined behavior. (Dell, 1985, p. 7)

"Power," as used by new epistemology literature, has never been clearly defined, and certainly never redefined, from a cybernetic perspective. Bateson's and Keeney's use of the term has referred primarily to the attempts of one person to unilaterally control her or himself, another person or some aspect of the environment. Instructive interaction, as discussed by Maturana, refers to "A" unilaterally determining how "B" will respond (Dell, 1985).

But the definition of *unilateral control* is only one of the many that have been proposed in the social science. In the clinical literature, Saleebey and Hunter (1980) examine powerlessness and interactional oppression in terms of the circumscription of thinking, feeling and acting in minority clients seeking professional help. Interactional oppression is said to occur in situations that remain ambiguous, deprive individuals of information, manipulate emotional arousal, and capitalize on authority or symbols of authority. Olsen (Cromwell & Olsen, 1975) proposes that power, is a system property, referring to the ability (potential or actual) of an individual(s) to change the behavior of other members in a social system. Family sociological research has conceptualized family and marital power from several different models, including decision making, resource theory and exchange theory perspectives. The greatest challenge to the position taken by Bateson and Keeney, however, is the perspective offered by feminists, conflict theorists, and, closer to home, other cybernetic systems thinkers, some of whom say that to dismiss power is to deny inequality.

Sociologists studying family power have largely ignored the socially structured inequities faced by women (Gillespie, 1971). Feminists (Eichler, 1981) have maintained that this is a bias enforced by the male-dominated gatekeeping of journals. Spender (1980) discusses the male domination of language itself, noting how language structures the subordination of women by encompassing the meanings of men and not those of women. Implicit rules, she argues, encourage men to dominate discussions and women to remain silent or promote men, thus maintaining power differences.

Conflict theorists assume that interpersonal relationships are not reciprocal but exploitative: Exchanges bring benefits to one and loss to the other. When a situation appears to be one of clear-cut symmetry, the conflict theorist looks for the social mechanism counteracting, or concealing, the inherent exploitation. For example, La Rossa (1977) notes how the increasing belief in sex role equalitarianism has undermined the legitimacy of male power and created the conditions in which women can challenge male privilege. Thus, the conflict between men and women, once concealed by female compliance, has now become more apparent (La Rossa, 1977).

It is interesting to note that outside the field of family therapy, other cyberneticians would disagree with the new epistemologists' dismissal of the concept of power. Sztompka (1974), for example, examines how functionalism is usually interpreted to mean that relationships are symmetrical, and all exchanges between them, equivalent—the notion of reciprocity. The underlying assumption is that all elements of society can be in perfect agreement. Deviations from ordered, harmonious relationships are cause for explanation, and this, Sztompka maintains, reflects a consensus view of society and a politically conservative position. Sztompka concludes that the bias towards reciprocal descriptions does not have to do with the inherent properties of systemic-functionalist theory, but reflects the value position of the theorists.

Monane (1967) goes so far as to state clearly that the systemic measure of power occurs when information is sent unilinearly and without meaningful feedback, i.e., the

causally determined  
eterminism is onto-  
r instruct the behav-  
stem to continue its

r been clearly defined,  
ateson's and Keeney's  
person to unilaterally  
vironment. Instructive  
determining how "B"

many that have been  
ey and Hunter (1980)  
the circumscription of  
onal help. Interactional  
deprive individuals of  
uthority or symbols of  
r, is a system property,  
to change the behavior  
rch has conceptualized  
ding decision making.  
hallenge to the position  
d by feminists, conflict  
ers, some of whom say

the socially structured  
(1981) have maintained  
g of journals. Spender  
ow language structures  
men and not those of  
discussions and women  
ences.

are not reciprocal but  
ther. When a situation  
ks for the social mech-  
For example, La Rossa  
m has undermined the  
women can challenge  
ce concealed by female

oy, other cyberneticians  
cept of power. Sztompka  
terpreted to mean that  
equivalent—the notion  
society can be in perfect  
are cause for explana-  
society and a politically  
reciprocal descriptions  
unctionalist theory, but

emic measure of power  
ngful feedback, i.e., the

dominance of one person's communication. Unless a social system is completely democratic, components of a system are not all equally directed towards others. Thus, while components may have mutual influence upon each other, this influence is definitely not equal influence.

Turk (1975) states that the controversy over "power" as a viable concept, generally reflects two concerns. First, abolishing its use may mean that the concept of hierarchy or rank is also dismissed. Second, power is often used as a way of indicating the degree of social benefits obtained by individuals within the current system. "Hierarchy" as applied to relationships, has already been dismissed by the new epistemology and the Milan model as a lineal construct (Keeney, 1979). In dismissing "power," the cybernetic paradigm has not developed new metaphors that identify differential social benefits.

By defining power simplistically, dismissing it and offering no other description for inequity in relationships characterized by domination and exploitation, the new epistemology lies in danger of mystifying issues concerning inequality in social arrangements. These differences in "power" are not random or arbitrary, but reflect a person's position within the socio-economic system, based to a large extent on gender, race and class.

### *Neutrality*

Neutrality as a guideline for the conductor of the session, (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1980a) is the instrumental counterpart of the Systemic view (Tomm, 1984b), and therefore, a cornerstone of Milan systemic therapy. Neutrality, states Tomm (1984b), implies that the therapist maintains a meta-position to family members, their beliefs, and their patterns of interaction, and avoids taking a position for or against behavioral change. This position excludes any prejudice concerning class, race, ethnicity, social norms and any concerns about illness or pathological diagnosis. The therapist avoids entering into anything more than fleeting coalitions with family members and, by the session's end, should be experienced by the family as equally aligned with each member.

The principle of neutrality also extends to the therapist's own views, as well. When therapists share similar beliefs and values to those of the family, they may engage in a series of surprising questions that challenge these socially acceptable assumptions. Tomm (1984b) gives the example of asking the questions, "Who enjoys fighting the most?", and, "What would be missing if all the arguing suddenly stopped?" (p. 263).

At its best, the principle of therapist neutrality is a significant advance over the implicit moralistic and judgmental positions sometimes taken by therapists. By appearing neutral to what the family presents, the therapist maintains an attitude of curiosity and acceptance that encourages the family to remain open with information about their interactions. The likelihood that the therapist will scapegoat one family member or become caught in the family's conflicts and, thus, be rendered ineffective, is also lessened. An appeal to neutrality by one team member to another may be enough to provoke the latter into examining his or her assumptions. Neutrality, thus, as a principle, ensures that therapists remain consistently aware that they are dealing with constructed realities, their own and family members', and that any one view should not be given priority as "the truth."

Systemic therapists, thus, maintain the norm of remaining in a nondirective role and of approaching the ideas, the family and individuals within a system from a neutral position. Therapists who take directive or strongly supportive roles in their work may be criticized for "losing their neutrality" (Miller, 1985). Whether or not they admit that neutrality is impossible in the absolute sense, the Milan approach, nevertheless, encourages the belief that neutrality is indeed possible, if one only operates by Milan principles.

But how possible is it for therapists to know when they have "lost their neutrality"? Can therapists really transcend their own view in order to take a neutral position?

To simply assume so, does not acknowledge the context in which the therapist attempts to decide what "neutral" is. The choices the therapist makes to remain silent, to interpret, to ask certain questions, Martin (1982) argues, are never really neutral. Even those therapists with the best of liberal, open-minded intentions may be quite destructive to clients who are part of a minority subculture. By examining the responses of heterosexual therapists to gay or lesbian clients, Martin concludes that therapists may perpetuate clients' feelings of powerlessness and self-disqualification when they fail to acknowledge the real issues of discrimination and psychosocial oppression these clients experience. The therapy system becomes isomorphic to a client's oppression within the social system.

Interviewing methodology, itself, despite the best intentions of therapists, may represent a class and gender bias. Models of therapy, like the Milan approach, which are less interested in emotional expression, and which simply treat affective experience as more "information," may represent a more male than female orientation to problem solving. Our very language (Spender, 1980) and the psychological theories that inform therapists' practice are inherently androcentric (Gilligan, 1982), lacking accurate representation of women's experience. Attempts to remain neutral by refusing to actively take a position on gender issues in marital therapy, whether or not these issues have been raised by the couple, Jacobson (1983) argues, implicitly aligns with the status quo, which benefits men more than women.

Social ideology is invisible to those immersed in it. If the ideology is inherently oppressive, neither therapist nor family members would necessarily know. As Martin (1982) points out, the problem is that it can be very difficult to spot manifestations of a cultural phenomenon while one is embedded in the culture. Given the nature of ideology, and the likelihood of subordinates' identification with it, it is unlikely that issues of oppression will be consistently raised by women or minority groups in therapy. The effect of conducting apparently value-free therapy is to reinforce, rather than challenge, the values which the client brings into therapy (Jacobson, 1983).

The larger question, then, is, "What actually constitutes neutrality?" If, by remaining "neutral," therapists do not actively challenge oppressive conditions, "neutrality" may condone the situation. Because the problems and conflicts within the family reflect larger social issues and viewpoints, whatever stance the therapist takes, even the stance of avoiding taking a stance, reflects a political position within the larger system regardless of the therapist's intentions. Relationships cannot remain neutral, nor therapy apolitical, in such a context.

#### *Drawing the Boundary*

James and McIntyre (1983) and Taggart (1985) have criticized family therapy for blaming families for their "dysfunction" by persistently drawing a boundary around the family itself. By doing so, the choice is made to view the family's distress as internally created and maintained and not amenable to change from outside the family. When families are seen with no reference to the social context in which they exist, an unfair locus of responsibility may be placed on the family (James & McIntyre, 1983). Therapists then act as agents of social control in attempting to force families to conform to an image simultaneously demanded by society and made impossible, (without "dysfunction") by society. Taggart views the current practice of the systemic view as not systemic enough, arguing for an expansion of the boundary to include both the therapist and the larger social context.

To what degree do these general criticisms of family therapy also apply to the Milan approach? It could be argued that they are more appropriately levelled at general

"lost their neutrality?"  
a neutral position?  
in which the therapist  
makes to remain silent,  
re never really neutral.  
ntentions may be quite  
examining the responses  
cludes that therapists  
qualification when they  
social oppression these  
to a client's oppression

ions of therapists, may  
Milan approach, which  
reat affective experience  
e orientation to problem  
ical theories that inform  
2), lacking accurate rep  
al by refusing to actively  
or not these issues have  
igns with the status quo,

ie ideology is inherently  
ssarily know. As Martin  
spot manifestations of a  
en the nature of ideology,  
s unlikely that issues of  
groups in therapy. The  
e, rather than challenge,  
3).

neutrality?" If, by remain-  
e conditions, "neutrality"  
within the family reflect  
ist takes, even the stance  
the larger system regard-  
ain neutral, nor therapy

icized family therapy for  
ng a boundary around the  
ly's distress as internally  
outside the family. When  
hich they exist, an unfair  
cIntyre, 1983). Therapists  
ies to conform to an image  
without "dysfunction") by  
w as not systemic enough,  
e therapist and the larger

py also apply to the Milan  
ately levelled at general

systems theory or first order cybernetic approaches in which the family is seen as a homeostatic organism and the therapist as separate from the family system. The conceptualization offered by second order cybernetics on the other hand, does not view the family as an organism nor does it necessarily punctuate the boundary around the family. Hoffmann (1985) views the problem as embedded in a meaning system that includes attributions of cause and blame. Such a system always includes the therapist, other involved agencies and cultural definitions, values and beliefs. Judging by the number of publications, the Milan approach has generated more concern with the interaction of families and the larger system than any previous model of therapy (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1980b; Imber Coppersmith, 1983a, 1983b; Miller, 1983, in press). The notion of "dysfunction," likewise, evolves from a view of families as organisms while systemic epistemology is a dramatic move *away* from ideas concerning pathology. As Dell (1983) argues, it "deconstructs pathology and leaves us to dwell in a world of our own values" (p. 64).

In practice, however, the Milan approach may be somewhat like a Rorschach test for the therapist. While all Milan therapists would agree about the importance of circular versus lineal hypotheses (Tomms, 1984b), the content of the hypotheses may differ dramatically from therapist to therapist because no content is prescribed by the model. The content derives from the therapists' previous experience, current psychological theories, and so on. The specific theory from which it is drawn is seen as having less importance than the fact that it enables the therapist to connect the relevant behaviors of the family members in a meaningful manner (Tomms, 1984b).

However, by never "marrying their hypotheses," i.e., never assuming that hypotheses represent any kind of truth, the content of these hypotheses is never really scrutinized. In this way, therapists' sexist or conservative assumptions can be smuggled in. If challenged, these can easily be defended by dismissing them as "only a hypothesis" or by accusing the challenger of lineal thinking when the contrary point of view is argued. On the other hand, by not prescribing content, the Milan approach, unlike many other models of family therapy, does leave open the possibility that a team could conceivably create hypotheses drawing from feminist or radical theories provided these connect family behaviors in a meaningful manner.

#### *Autonomy of the System*

Autopoiesis, a term coined by Maturana, (1980) refers to the maintenance of the system's distinctive wholeness or identity—its highest order of recursion (Keeney, 1983; Dell, 1982, 1985). If "the organization of a living system is circular then the organization is a *closed* organization. . . . The significance of organizational closure is that it directly implies autonomy" (Dell, 1985, p. 6, discussing Varela and Maturana, 1973). "Each living system has its own autonomous individuality because the nature of its structure fully specifies how the system will behave under any and all interactions. Interactions do *not* specify how the system will behave, the *system* specifies how it will behave" (Dell, 1985, p. 6).

Which systems can be considered autonomous? Maturana's ideas developed from observing biological systems and he refers to individuals as autonomous. While Keeney (1983), Dell (1982), and others assume that families can be considered autonomous, it has never been argued clearly whether or not families fulfill the criteria of organizational closure. Hoffman (1985), in fact, clearly contends that they are not autonomous systems, and are better conceptualized as networks. Despite their theoretical clarity regarding the observer's role in drawing boundaries, the notion of autonomy appears to have been easily reified by therapists in practice. Keeney discusses how Milan therapists may be advised to respect the family's autonomy, i.e., the family's coherence (Dell, 1982) or homeostatis of homeostasis, (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin and Prata, 1978) and

it is probably from this perspective that Milan therapists have coined the catch phrases "respecting the autonomy of the system" or allowing the family to "find its own solutions."

In this way, they refer to the autonomy of the family system as if it existed out there, instead of, as second order cybernetics points out, as a construction or punctuation of a process by an observer. Thus, the family is reified. The process by which the observer drew the boundary is forgotten and Milan therapists re-make the same error as first order cybernetics—that of considering the family a "thing." It is at this level that Taggart's criticisms still apply.

How serious is this error in practice? Such a view of autonomy, while erroneous, may be useful. In the Milan approach, the therapist remains nondirective, a consultant to the family, a position seemingly more respectful of the family. Milan therapists do not easily accept the role of social control agents. They are probably one of the few groups of therapists to even distinguish between therapy and social control.

The crucial issue, however, is: For whom are therapists demonstrating respect when they respect the "autonomy" of the family? It could be argued that such respect frequently colludes with, and maintains, an oppressive institution. Unconditional respect for the family is irreconcilable with the numerous sociological and political critiques that have questioned the value of the traditional family form for women and children (Firestone, 1970; Pogrebin, 1983). While historically the family has been a sanctuary for most men, it has been a quite the opposite for most women and children, who frequently experience sexual and physical abuse within its domain (Lindsey, 1981; Pogrebin, 1983).

Respecting the "autonomy of the system" and its ability to self-govern or "find its own solutions" assumes that families are voluntary organizations functioning for the ultimate good of all members. This does not take into consideration the fact that families have "found their own solutions" for centuries and that these solutions have been primarily at the expense of women and children.

Even when particular families are not oppressive to their members, it may be naive, at best, to presume that families can self-govern or "find their own solutions" during an era that has stripped many families of such things as adequate income, housing and health care. Women, the disabled and other minorities, have also been stripped of access to equal opportunities. Uncritical use of concepts from the new epistemology may lead therapists to abandon families in much the same way that right wing politics eroded services by calling for an increase in respect for the family's own authority.

#### *Inclusion of the Therapist*

The second order cybernetic view argues, in a manner similar to that of the feminist critics, that it is the observer (or therapist) who draws the distinctions that "create the reality." Therapists draw the boundary around the family, around the therapist-family system or around the family and larger systems. Drawing boundaries and deciding what level of system to observe are considered epistemological acts. By including the observer as part of the system observed, second order cybernetics acknowledges that the system considered relevant is a construction of the observer drawing the distinctions. In relation to "who draws the boundary," Taggart (1985) argues for "nothing less than the inclusion of the therapist in family therapy" (p. 121). Having not distinguished between first and second order cybernetics, Taggart does not clarify that this is also what the new epistemology proposes. The Milan approach may be leading the field in exemplifying this position.

The new epistemology has, for example, consistently argued that it is an epistemological error to view a family as "resistant." Therapy is not a linear cause/effect process of the therapist acting on families while remaining an outsider. Rather, the

therapist and family comprise a co-evolving system engaged in a recursive process. Resistance as a phenomenon is said to belong to the domain of the therapist/family relationship, another level of systemic process, in which the therapist and family draw distinctions upon distinctions. Therapists who work within the Milan approach include themselves as part of the systemic process. They are able to consider family members' behavior as information concerning the therapist/family system, and may alter subsequent interactions with the family in light of this information. By examining their own participation in therapy, therapists may develop a deeper awareness of the significance of ethics and responsibility (Tomm, 1985).

Despite taking this step, the Milan approach does not seem to have gone far enough. The Milan model has not made it apparent that therapists' world views, in particular their social and political belief systems, feature highly in drawing distinctions about the problem and level of system to be seen as "autonomous." Drawing distinctions is, thus, not only an epistemological act, it is a political act. The Milan approach, however, has thus far ignored this issue.

By defining the therapeutic situation as one of mutuality or "co-evolution," Milan therapists, all too easily, presume that the therapist and client are *equal* contributors in constructing the therapeutic reality. The therapists' vantage point in the social hierarchy, their ability to manipulate symbols of authority and their greater influence in negotiating therapeutic realities is, thus, obscured. Perhaps, most obvious, is the situation of the white therapist with the black family, the "professional" therapist with the welfare family, or the male therapist with the single-parent mother. Every therapeutic situation is one in which the therapist, by virtue of asking the questions, by indicating what is or is not a suitable answer, by pursuing some lines of inquiry and ignoring others, is exceedingly more influential than the family (Scheff, 1968).

#### *Constructivism*

The constructivist view within the cybernetic paradigm posits that objective reality is not possible. Rather, the world is created through the distinctions drawn upon it by the observer in a recursive operation (Keeney, 1983). In this way, the observer constructs and binds together an "ecology of ideas"—the construction and maintenance of reality. The world "out there," then, does not exist. We live in a "multi-verse" rather than a universe, and it is through language, suggests Maturana (Cecchin, et al., 1984b) that we are able to construct our individual view of the "world."

The basis of a social action perspective, on the other hand, is material. An individual's or family's world view exists within a historical context. The belief that parents should love and protect their children, for example, is, in historical terms, a relatively new phenomenon (Aries, 1962), yet one which most of us accept unquestioningly. World views are constructed from within an individual (gender, age) and collective (class, race) vantage point in the social system hierarchy. From a radical perspective, world views are inextricably linked to social ideology which is not coincidental, individual, or neutral. Rather, ideology serves to distort the true relationships of material production by representing the interests of the ruling class as if they were the interests of all. Domination is stabilized without coercion by the subordinate's belief in the legitimacy of their subordination (Giddens, 1973).

Taggart (1985) discounts the constructivist view in family therapy as a naive version of constructivism which focuses almost exclusively on the clients' creation of their own reality. One could argue, however, that the application of the constructivist view within the Milan approach has had a significant impact on the degree to which therapists are aware of how they, as therapists, are involved in creating the reality of the family under observation. They are, thus, more inclined to assume increased responsibility for their

implicit judgments made of particular families or family members. Rather than "marry their hypotheses," or assume they know the "truth," they are flexible in understanding a family from different perspectives.

When the constructivist view is applied to understanding families, however, Taggart's criticisms still hold. Many Milan therapists operate as if the family's distress is created solely by the family's individually constructed view of reality. They do not acknowledge the social processes whereby families or therapists arrive at the content of their constructions, implying that the content is specific to the particular person or family. From a radical viewpoint, this belies the significance of social and political realities as they are manifested, for example, in poverty, unemployment, racism and sexism.

To view belief systems as individually constructed, attributes responsibility for the beliefs to the individual concerned, thus, ignoring the political function of ideology. Take, for example, the ideology of motherhood. Wearing (1984) argues that women's beliefs concerning motherhood serve male interests in a number of ways. Men are excluded from the responsibility of parenting, allowing them greater freedom to pursue their own interests. The ideology legitimates and obfuscates women's lack of ownership of the means of production and access to top level positions, equal opportunities and distribution of material resources. By virtue of parenting, women are disadvantaged or excluded from male definitions of culture, values, achievements, status and prestige. Nor is ideology maintained by all participants equally. It is those with the greater sources of potential power, e.g., market capacity, status, and party membership, etc., (in the ideology of motherhood: men, and not women), who maintain the right to have their definition of the situation accepted. Those with less power are more likely to have their view of reality discredited.

As currently practiced, the constructivist view implies that solutions may be found through simply changing how one thinks, rather than making structural changes in society. The ability to transcend the limitations of an ideology, however, seem clearly related to the individual's ability to increase her or his material- and status-based sources of power (Wearing, 1984). In the case of the ideology of motherhood, Wearing discovered that it was only these women who could increase their material sources of power vis à vis the males in the immediate milieu, who were able to consider alternative ideas when they were exposed to them.

Within the Milan approach, the theoretical inclusion of the therapist has not brought forth the results Taggart seems to desire, i.e., the acknowledgement of the socio-political implications of the therapist's views, nor has the new epistemology reached the conclusion made by Taggart—that the construction of reality is a socially constituted process rather than a private affair. The difficulty here may be that the discussion about the degree to which families' belief systems or their troubles are socially constituted is one that is also subject to epistemological constraints. Asking therapists to include socio-political factors in therapy, therefore, generates further diverse "realities." Within a conservative political belief system, sociopolitical factors are seen as irrelevant to therapy. Individual belief systems are primary—a consensus of individual beliefs determines social belief systems. From a radical viewpoint, sociopolitical factors are highly relevant because the larger social ideology is seen as influencing individual belief systems which reflect and incorporate it. Thus, to ask conservative therapists to conceptualize themselves as part of the therapy system results in no more than the apparently apolitical and instrumental view of their involvement that Taggart has already noted characterizes the new epistemology thus far. Constructivism then, as a concept, may lead us politically in either direction. Applied currently, as an explanation of individual world views, it maintains a conservative focus.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has considered the new epistemology and Milan approach separately from feminist criticisms of family therapy, generally. By including it with first order cybernetic approaches, earlier critiques have obscured the differences between first and second order cybernetics. The second order cybernetic perspective has seriously challenged notions of therapist objectivity, pointed to the relevance of considering the therapist, and generated considerable concern with the family and larger systems. Even the notion of constructivism has the potential to be utilized in a radical sense. If, for example, the concept of constructivism was extended to understanding problems and issues from a social construction viewpoint, social ideology, as it is manifested in the family, may be illuminated. Therapists might ask such questions as: "Who has been most influential in determining current beliefs? Who is most served by the current beliefs and social definitions of problems and relationships? What has been the socio-historical evolution of these beliefs?" This, by necessity, takes us beyond the family as a thing and forces us to examine the social construction of our own theories and ideologies concerning the family, gender, heterosexuality, motherhood, and childhood, and of problems we have hitherto located within the family such as child abuse, incest and wife battering.

The new epistemology and Milan approach have, nevertheless, failed to develop this potential. The interpretation and application of the cybernetic paradigm has, instead, developed in a conservative direction. The popularity of the new epistemology and Milan approach is linked in time to the growing dominance of conservative politics in Western countries. They can be seen both as a reaction against such thinking as well as, in application, collusive with conservative views concerning the family, social problems and social change. While second order cybernetics may have greater potential to incorporate a radical analysis than has any earlier family therapy paradigm, in practice, the approach seems constrained by the sociopolitical conservatism of its proponents. Whether others of a less dominant gender, race or class will expand the application of the new epistemology and Milan approach, or, indeed, whether or not their attempts to do so would be recognized, remains to be seen.

## REFERENCES

- Aries, P. (1962). *Centuries of childhood*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine.
- Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Bitensky, R. (1973). The influence of political power in determining the theoretical development of social work. *Journal of Social Policy*, 2, 119-130.
- Boscolo, L., Cecchin, G., Maturana, H. & von Foerster, H. (1984a, April). *Responses to questions, general discussion*. Videotape from The Construction of Therapeutic Realities Conference, Family Therapy Program, University of Calgary, Canada.
- Boscolo, L., Cecchin, G., Maturana, H. & von Foerster, H. (1984b, April). *The bringing forth of reality*. Videotape from The Construction of Therapeutic Realities Conference, Family Therapy Program, University of Calgary, Canada.
- Cromwell, R. & Olson, D. (1975). *Power in families*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Dell, P. (1982). Beyond homeostasis: Toward a concept of coherence. *Family Process*, 21, 21-41.
- Dell, P. (1983). From pathology to ethics. *The Family Therapy Networker*, p. 29.
- Dell, P. (1985). Understanding Bateson and Maturana: Toward a biological foundation for the social sciences. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 11, 1-20.
- Eichler, M. (1981). Power, dependency, love and the sexual division of labour. A critique of the decision-making approach to family power and an alternative approach, with an appendix: On washing my dirty linen in public. *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 4, 201-219.
- Firestone, S. (1970). *The dialectic of sex*. New York: Marrow.